

The Ecumenical Academy Prague and its activities on fair trade

The Ecumenical Academy Prague (*Ekumenická akademie Praha – EAP*) is an independent, non-profit non-governmental organisation engaged in the field of adult education. EAP organises seminars, conferences and workshops on various issues related to culture, politics, religion and society, social justice, sustainable development, North-South divide etc. The Academy is active in networking with partner institutions in the Czech Republic, in the region of Central and Eastern Europe and throughout the whole Europe. EAP participates in campaigning and advocacy activities and undertakes research.

The Academy started its work in 1995 and was registered in January 1996. Its current members are five Czech churches, six other institutions and individual members of different backgrounds and nationalities. EAP became the first member of EURODAD, European Network on Debt and Development, from the new EU countries. The Academy is also a founding member of the Czech Forum for Development Cooperation (FoRS), Czech Association for Fair Trade and Czech anti-poverty campaign (part of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty – GCAP). Additionally, EAP cooperates with other international networks such as Développement et Civilisation and Oikosnet. It has also numerous other partners including churches, church related organisations as well as national and international non-governmental organisations. Since 2010 EAP is also the first Czech member of the World Fair Trade Organisation.

A big part of the Academy's educational as well as practical activities is connected to the issue of alternatives to the so-called free trade. Global trade and its current conditions are one of the most powerful instruments of perpetuating or even increasing the economic inequality between the Global North and South. Poor developing countries have been forced through different means to open their markets for goods from developed countries. At the same time, they have been faced with the necessity to export their agricultural production adjusted to the needs of importers, and consequently have been losing the capacity to feed their own population. These most vulnerable economies have been further damaged by the rich countries' agricultural subsidies and the increasing problem of the so-called land-grabbing.

Since the end of 1990s this kind of analysis has been a content of the EAP's seminars and publications, which has helped to create a critical consciousness among the Czech public. Many people have understood better the complex context of poor countries' development. Still, however, there has been little space for an adequate action by the public, apart from financially supporting certain development projects or protesting, which are not exactly what the Czechs are used to doing. In this context a potential for fair trade activities has been recognized.

A pioneer fair trade initiative in the Czech republic was the establishment, by several Prague protestant parishes, of the organisation called One World (*Jeden svět*), which in 1994 founded the first fair trade shop. The organisation has no paid staff and works only with volunteers. Beside fair trade products, it sells also products from local workshops for disabled people. Later on another fair trade shop was opened in Prague. EAP supported this initiative and decided to increase the number of activities aimed to improve the situation of the poorest people in developing countries. The Academy decided to realise this goal by helping to spread the fair trade system.

An important step in this regard was establishing the fair trade wholesale. The idea was to enable the creation of new retailer initiatives without the necessity to bother with import rules and certification of products. This pioneer work was successful and in 2003 EAP became the very first fair trade wholesaler in the post communist countries. The trading activity,

relatively modest in the beginning, helped to encourage new actors to sell fair trade products in shops, NGO offices and other places. The Czech Republic's accession to the European Union made the custom rules much easier and enabled the import of food products without difficulties.

The trading activity was preceded and is still accompanied by extensive educational work consisting of lectures, seminars, public actions and publications. In the frame of several projects, funded mostly by the European Commission, EAP shows fair trade as a real and functioning alternative to the prevailing trade system. Fair trade is able to guarantee to producers in developing countries a decent life with a possibility of further development. The production of food products for export is accompanied by growing food for own needs with the use of sustainable and environmentally friendly methods. For the customers in rich countries, buying fair trade products is a good opportunity to support just development and at the same time a chance to obtain high quality products while acting ethically.

EAP is also active in networking in the field of fair trade. In the year 2004, the Academy became one of the three funding members of the Czech Association for Fair Trade (other two were: One World and OnEarth – Society for Fair Trade) – an umbrella organisation, which currently has seven members. In 2009, after years of negotiation, the Association signed a contract with the most important fair trade certification authority – Fair Trade Labelling Organisations International (FLO – the owner of the Fairtrade Certification Mark) and became its first partner and first marketing organisation in the post-socialist countries. Furthermore, in 2010 EAP became the first Czech member of the World Fair Trade Organisation. On the national level, the Academy cooperates closely especially with the already mentioned organisation OnEarth – Society for Fair Trade (*NaZemi – Společnost pro Fair Trade*), which is also heavily involved in the educational work on fair trade. In last years, both organisations have coordinated effectively a couple of projects together.

The success of the Czech fair trade story is proved by the increasing turnover, which reached more than 2 000 000 € in 2009.

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